

Reason and Respect

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Spring* 2008

Article 1

6-16-2008

Culture clash: Ojibwe identity in Erdrich's Tracks

Lauren Cotham
Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr>

Recommended Citation

Cotham, Lauren (2008) "Culture clash: Ojibwe identity in Erdrich's Tracks," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol4/iss1/1>

Copyright ©6-16-2008 by the authors
Reason and Respect is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.

Culture Clash: Ojibwe Identity in Erdrich's *Tracks*

Lauren Cotham, Creative Writing '08

Imagine the struggle within one Anishinaabe forced onto reservation land, living in some sort of strange, undefined limbo, dancing back and forth over the line separating two vastly differing cultures. Such has been the case of the Ojibwe, a subdivision of the Anishinaabeg, so poignantly portrayed by Louise Erdrich in her novel *Tracks*. A deeply spiritual and traditional people, the Ojibwe, like other Native Peoples in the United States, faced more than the loss of land when forced onto reservations in the nineteenth century. The structuring of reservation land became the physical representation of the cultural boundaries created by European Americans. With first contact, so began the progression towards cultural domination that culminated in the creation and implementation of the United States' assimilation policy—a process of physical displacement and cultural genocide that solidified a dualistic state of being among Native Peoples in North America.

The loss of culture took place at varying degrees on the macro and micro level. At the macro level is the destruction of the tribal social structure; at the micro level is a declassification of identity within the individual. *Tracks* problematizes the inner workings of the Ojibwe as a duality of identity forced upon them through European American enculturation. Through her writing, Erdrich positions readers to experience the internal friction of characters who are both connected to and disconnected from their cultural identities.

The novel is a work based on history, but it is a history told by an author who exemplifies the continuing strain of duality that exists within the Ojibwe today—one that has the ability to take on a new meaning when explored by Erdrich. She creates her characters as “[c]onfined within and defined by the borders of a reservation and the boundaries of ethnic definition, Erdrich (who is herself part Chippewa, part German American) uses the concept of the border as a metaphor and narrative strategy for a newly imagined negotiation of individual and cultural identity” (Ferrari 1). Due to her own blended heritage, the author holds a distinctive internalized view as a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, as well as a view of the Ojibwe from the outside world.

Imitating and honoring her cross-cultural background, Erdrich's writing style, one she defines as “a mixture of the Ojibwe storyteller and the German system-maker” (Sprenger Interview), exemplifies the duality of the author's cultural connections. The characters in *Tracks* also reflect a multifaceted ethnic makeup, speaking directly to the cultural blending not only of the author's ethnicity, but also of the commonality of ethnic intermarriages between the Ojibwe and those of European descent. The impact her ethnicity has on her writing is not lost on Erdrich, who says “to be of mixed blood is a great gift for a writer. I have one foot on tribal lands and one foot in middle-class life” (Max 116-117).

This essay will focus on the three main characters in *Tracks*, who illustrate the confusion about and dangers of the loss of cultural heritage. The first part of the essay will provide an historical overview of the Ojibwe to familiarize readers with why cultural duality has

become a pervasive component of their history. The second part of the essay is a character analysis that will reveal the various manifestations of this duality.

Historical Overview of the Ojibwe and European-American Contact*

The Anishinaabeg, a distinct member of the expansive *Omamiwininiwak* (Algonquin) language group, are a tribal people who reside mostly in the Great Lakes region of Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Wisconsin and Michigan as well as parts of Canada. A facet of the Anishinaabeg, the Ojibwe of North Dakota are a woodland people who traditionally relied on hunting, growing crops, and fishing as their main means of survival. As one of the most prevalent nations in the United States, the Anishinaabeg history is dense with rich cultural traditions. Like that of many other Native Peoples, the Ojibwe philosophy is strongly founded on the importance of tribal and familial bonds among the ancestral Anishinaabeg, the living and the future generations. This relationship, as well as their connection with the natural world, instilled the belief that all entities, both spiritual and physical, deserve equal respect. The spirit of an ancient tribal member and a smoothed rock each receive the same deference as would a brother or grandparent.

With the invasion of their land, the Ojibwe nation became attuned to the continuous struggle of preserving their cultural identity. Deconstruction and assimilation became ever-present factors of Ojibwe life. Acting as guides for French and other European explorers who held no respect for the land and nature, the Ojibwe unknowingly aided in over-hunting game and wasting natural resources. Next came Jesuit missionaries, who feverishly worked to claim the souls of the Ojibwe. Misled and coerced, many left their traditional spirituality and converted to Christianity, while others accepted this new religion and blended it with Ojibwe practices. In either case, the tactics of mission workers corrupted the traditional Ojibwe way of life. Later, European Americans sought to redefine and assimilate the Ojibwe into their own culture, using their gained knowledge of the Ojibwe to deceive them, resulting in the loss of their ancestral homeland to expansion and their children to boarding schools. The Ojibwe unintentionally aided in their own physical and cultural demise by maintaining, as amicably as possible, their strained relationship with European Americans.

The opening lines of *Tracks* speak directly to this physical and spiritual loss. Nanapush, an elder living on the reservation, foresees a dismal future for his people. He states that the “disaster must surely have spent its force, that disease must have claimed all the Anishinaabe that the earth could hold and bury. But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were [the Ojibwe] people once”(1). Nanapush identifies the causal shift in the loss of Ojibwe strength as an escalating cultural turmoil. The elder saw first-hand the changes forced upon his people after the intrusion of European Americans—who destroyed the land with their need to possess what was not theirs; who brought with them the invisible assault of diseases that infiltrated and could not be fought—who were beginning to encroach not only physically, but spiritually.

It is imperative to know a culture at its most basic level, to clear away all pretense and stereotypical viewpoints in order to appreciate the Ojibwe society as it essentially *was* in this historical context, and not how European Americans have reconstructed it. At the

basis of the cultural duality imposed on the Ojibwe was the corruption of their tribal name, the very identification of their society. The name Ojibwe applies to the grouping of Anishinaabeg that Erdrich focuses on in her writing. When explorers and trappers came to the Great Lakes region, they began calling the Ojibwe the Chippewa, which is how most Americans recognize these people today. Also, on a smaller scale, individuals were often assigned non-Ojibwe names. As the Ojibwe became more assimilated, many began to use these newly appointed names more frequently than their traditional ones. This renaming process—with no regard for the impact, importance and meaning that one's name has on identity—forced into question the very element that bound the tribe together: the notion of the collective and connective identity among a people.

In addition to the appropriation and later permeation of non-traditional names, the Ojibwe subsequently lost their land in a deliberate attempt at further cultural domination by the European Americans. From the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries, the land allotted to the Ojibwe eventually began to disappear. The insincerity of the United States portrays the duality of firstly “giving” reservation land to the Ojibwe, and then “reclaiming” it until many Ojibwe were forced to venture into the streets of newly settled towns.

Reservations were portrayed as places where the Ojibwe could continue to practice their own social order without the intrusion of European Americans. Yet, at the same time this separation and containment took place, there was also a movement of assimilation sweeping through the entire Anishinaabeg nation. Upon consigning the Ojibwe and other Native Peoples to reservations, the United States decreed that the tribes were sovereign nations residing within the United States and therefore were not under the jurisdiction of the state or federal government. But on reservations, the notion of *cultural* sovereignty fell exceedingly short for the Ojibwe. In many cases, children were forced to attend missionary or off-reservation boarding schools. These schools were either run by Christian religious organizations or by the government and were highly efficient in their attempts to remove and distort cultural understanding in future generations. Habitually, the United States is seen as a country where many different cultures flourish freely, with amalgamating facets of the variety of traditions forming what is seen as “American” culture. However effectively this notion is purported, one only has to note how the Native Peoples of North America were treated. The often-overlooked traumatic history of the United States and the original inhabitants of this land optimizes a clash of cultures, one that Erdrich brings to life in *Tracks*.

In the United States, the aftereffects of Native cultural destruction has been an apathetic memory and created an inaccurate history crafted as truth rather than as a carefully constructed agenda. The Ojibwe are *still* attempting to pick up the pieces of their cultural traditions—stolen, mangled, dismantled and in some cases, forever lost. Presently, many Americans have little to no knowledge of the plethora of traditions and cultures that remain strong or have regained their authority within Native communities. The misrepresentation of the accurate history between the United States and the Ojibwe is a singular example of an evolving form of cultural annihilation against Native Peoples. Once the physical structures of the proposed obliteration were established, the stage was

set for the intrusion of the mind and the invasion of the spirit. Erdrich's novel captures the moment in time when this collective war on the body, mind and spirit, was waged against one small band of Anishinaabeg.

**Historical information in this section comes from years of study and personal knowledge. For a selection of historical references about the Anishinaabeg and other Native Peoples of North America, as well as critical works addressing more current Native issues, please see the References Section at the end of this essay.*

Manifestations of Cultural Duality in Tracks

Tracks is a fictionalized account of the North Dakota Ojibwe in the early 1900's. Written in 1989, the novel is a study of the Ojibwe's struggle to maintain and continue practicing their culture while, at the same time, resisting *and* embracing the European American influences. Erdrich recreates this conflict, allowing the audience a glimpse into the friction between those who stoutly refused to mingle their beliefs, those who accepted some European American ways and those Ojibwe caught in the middle. The storyline carries from 1912 through 1924 and is primarily focused around an unnamed reservation, taking place (minimally) in the fictional town of Argus, North Dakota.

Erdrich's work presents a culture on the verge of extinction, a people who are struggling to retain their land and their way of life while both are diminishing greatly in number. The novel is filled with the struggle to regain, maintain, enforce and promote the social order of the Ojibwe in this time of chaos. To address the complexity of this period of cultural shifting, the friction between two dissimilar cultures, Erdrich employs Fleur, Pauline and Nanapush to serve as the rhetorical forces of her work.

The story is told in the Ojibwe oral tradition, and employs a dual narration structure. The first is the voice of Nanapush telling his young granddaughter, Lulu, the tale of her mother's fight for traditional survival at a time when it seemed there was little left to fight for, and with no one daring to stand with her. The second narrative voice is of Pauline Puyat, a young woman of Canadian and Ojibwe ethnicity, who has renounced her Ojibwe connection. Both accounts are centered around the actions of Fleur Pillager, as she tries to maintain the world she knew at a time when everyone around her is plunging into an unknown confusion of the clash between Ojibwe and European American culture. Fleur is a force so potent that both Nanapush and Pauline, for reasons that at first appear to be different—but lie inherently in Fleur's undeniable connection to the traditional Ojibwe way of life—focus their retelling of a tragic time of loss and disjointed identity around the path of this woman.

Fleur Pillager is a character of quiet strength. Adopted by Nanapush after her family was lost to disease, she is the singular strand holding the remaining Ojibwe to the very basis of their culture. The woman, carrying a last name that evokes uneasiness among her people, fights to continue living the traditional life-ways of the Ojibwe, defying those who seek to permanently alter it: "She was the funnel of [their] history. As the lone survivor of the Pillagers, she staggered now beneath the burden of a life she failed to deserve" (178). When speaking of Fleur, Nanapush says, "all she had was raw power, and

the names of the dead that filled her" (7). Fleur is the strongest connection that the remaining Ojibwe have to their past, their power and the inviolability of their ancestral landscape, an authority that fades with the loss of Ojibwe culture.

Ojibwe spirits, the *Manitou*, "spoke through Fleur...Turtle's quavering scratch, the Eagle's shriek, Loon's crazy bitterness, Otter, the howl of Wolf, the Bear's low rasp"(59). In other words, the very origins of the Ojibwe people are personified in this one woman. Rather than accept the cultural invasion, Fleur departs backwards into the strength of her ancestors and "[gets] herself into some half-forgotten medicine" (12) of the past. The other tribal members deem her dangerous, "thinking that she couldn't be left alone out there, a woman gone wild, striking down whatever got into her path. People said that she had to be harnessed" (45). Fleur's own people feared her because she had no trepidation of what many other Ojibwe saw as the impending loss of their culture.

As the novel progresses, Fleur's power seems to diminish in a direct representation of the collective Ojibwe's weakening resistance to assimilation. The others deem Fleur to be "living in the old days" (174) when she strongly resists the takeover of Pillager land. Although Nanapush anticipates Fleur's progressively weakening state, he acknowledges that the continual pressure and stress caused by the loss of Pillager land leaves Fleur a "different person" (177). Nanapush states that "power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive" (177). Without support from the rest of the Ojibwe, Fleur's strength is fleeting, distorted by those too weak to hold on to the truth when it is tested.

Fleur's direct foil, Pauline Puyat, is a woman who despises the traditional Ojibwe lifestyle and seeks only to separate herself from her Ojibwe ethnicity. Instead of respecting her familial identity, she designates her people as "the clan for which the name was lost" (14). Pauline often claims invisibility, as well as the inability to affirm a kinship to either the Ojibwe or the European American cultures: she "blended," and could "fade into the corner" (16). But, in spite of her disdain for the Ojibwe way of life, in direct opposition of her attempt to leave her intrinsic background in the past, the very thing Pauline attempts to disregard haunts her, often in the form of Fleur Pillager. When she witnesses Fleur's rape at the hands of a butcher in the town of Argus, Pauline recalls, "I closed my eyes and put my hands on my ears so there is nothing more to describe but what I couldn't block out...Fleur's hoarse breath, so loud it filled me, her cry in the old language and our names repeated over and over among the worlds" (26). Fleur's voice is a scarily strong reminder of what Pauline is not able to completely separate herself from, no matter how vigilantly she attempts to do so. Of Pauline, Nanapush says she was "an unknown mixture of ingredients...we never knew what to call her, or where she fit or how to think when she was around" (39). Pauline made the others uneasy with her over eagerness to be a part of the European American culture. Because she was freely accepting of the imposing culture, Pauline reflects the infiltrating European American force, invading her own people.

After realizing her affection for collecting "sinner's" souls, Pauline becomes the embodiment of the United States' desire to decimate the Ojibwe and portrays herself as

though she is a disease unleashed upon them. This symbolism is evident when she says, “I handled the dead until the cold feel of their skin was a comfort, until I no longer bothered to bathe once I left the cabin but touched others with the same hands, passed death on” (69). Pauline begins to twist reality until she believes that it is her duty to destroy the Ojibwe, passing the illnesses brought by European Americans and transmitting death with her hands.

Swayed by the European American mindset, Pauline emerges as nothing more than a pawn of the occupying people. Her inability to deal with her part-Ojibwe ethnicity causes her mind to disintegrate, much like the Ojibwe traditional culture surrounding her. Pauline describes herself in the following manner: “I was their own fate” (75). As she attempts to wreak havoc, Pauline feigns a strong affiliation with the Christian God. It becomes apparent that Pauline, like many others, misconstrues religion in order to benefit her less-than-admirable purpose. In a sense, Pauline’s true god is the idea of European American domination, indicated most obviously in these words: “He had an important plan for me, for which I must prepare, that I should find out the habits and hiding places of His enemy” (137). After leaving the reservation and joining a nearby convent Pauline states, “God would love me better as a lily of the field though no such flower as I had yet appeared on reservation ground” (203). Pauline sees Fleur and what she represents as the final hurdle she must jump in order to achieve total obliteration of the Ojibwe. Sadly, she has internalized the European American sense of superiority.

The final character, Nanapush, is the most complex of the three. He lived through the forced removal of his people onto reservation land. At the beginning of his narration, Nanapush explains that the “tribe unraveled like a coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and the new among us were taken” (2). He has seen those before him pass on into the spirit world and, witnessing the varying extremes of Fleur, Pauline and the many in between, he is seeing the younger generations lose their identity both unwillingly and willingly. As a guide to European explorers, Nanapush watched the land his people cherished plucked bare by white hands. Having saved Fleur from the sickness that ran like wildfire through the Ojibwe, killing off the remaining Pillager clan except a young Fleur and a distant cousin, Nanapush holds a strong bond with the traditional roots of his people. Without him, Fleur and her connection to the ancestral past would have been completely lost.

Nanapush was educated in an off-reservation boarding school and is one of the few on the reservation who can write the English language: “I had a Jesuit education in the halls of Saint John before I ran back to the woods and forgot all my prayers” (33). Because he is experienced with both Western and Ojibwe traditions, Nanapush is able to flow seamlessly between the two cultures, using aspects of both in an effort to maintain the cohesiveness of the small band of Ojibwe left on the reservation. He says, “I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, and every obstacle” (7). Because of the duality within his own person, Nanapush has the ability to see that the “waters were so muddy” (61) between these two cultures, while acknowledging that he himself continues to muddy the situation. Carrying information between the Ojibwe and

European Americans, Nanapush uses his knowledge of the dominant culture in an attempt to preserve the integrity of his own.

These three characters allow a glimpse into the various degrees of interaction connecting these two cultures, revealing the difficulty of defining the continual relationship between the Ojibwe and the European Americans as purely negative or aggressive from the outset. It developed into the cultural clash as religious intolerance grew and the newly formed nation of the United States sought to deconstruct another that stood in the way of "progress." Fleur, Pauline and Nanapush exemplify the paltry choices left once the United States decided that the Ojibwe could not exist as they had for thousands of years.

Fleur is the embodiment of the resistant Ojibwe reaction of European American assimilation. But it was not the complete repudiation of the European American culture that led to the degeneration of the traditional Ojibwe lifestyle. Pauline is the personification of "successful" assimilation into European American society. But it was not the complete acceptance of a different culture through the abandonment of their own that proved to further the erosion of Ojibwe culture. Nanapush symbolizes the product of the clash between these two cultures. But it was not the danger of treading back and forth over the blurry line of shifting identity between the Ojibwe and European American culture that played an integral role in the almost complete dissolution of the Ojibwe way of life. It was the amalgamation of these three uncomfortable positions that the Ojibwe were forced into by the ravages of a war against their culture that initiated the cracks that shot through the foundation of the tribe, separating and dividing it subject to a force intending to do just that.

Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* is a subtle yet unyielding reminder of the cultural assault on all Native Peoples. Fleur, Pauline and Nanapush are representations of the lasting effects that this structure of deconstruction had on Ojibwe society. The hypocrisy of the United States' policy on dealing with Native Peoples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—division and assimilation—was not the unintentional uncertainty and employment of two dissimilar tactics. In actuality, the duality of these two methods only *appeared* to be in opposition to each other, and were instead the careful construction of a well formed, two-sided method employed by the United States to reach the same result—the eradication of traditional Native cultures.

From this tragic history, a new culture of duality emerged. There are two ethnicities, Ojibwe and German, within one author. There are two cultural traditions melding to form one unique writing style. There are the characters of Fleur and Pauline, two women representing the two divergent responses to the culture clash within one tribal band, with Nanapush, balancing in between. There are two names, the Ojibwe and the Chippewa, for one people. There are two nations, the Anishinaabeg and the United States of America, occupying one land. Two means of dismantling the Ojibwe social structure—separation and assimilation—were combined to form one effective method of destruction. Two distinct cultures, both with the possibility to thrive, yet the singular false notion that there was only opportunity for one, prevailed. And so, there was only one culture dismantled at the hands of another.

Works Cited

- Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.
- Bacon, Katie. "An Emissary of the Between-World" in *The Atlantic Unbound*. The Atlantic Monthly Group: January 17th 2001.
- Ferrari, Rita. "Where the Map Stopped: The Aesthetics in Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine and Tracks" in *Style*: 1999.
- Max, D.T. "Tales of Burning Love" in *Harper's Bazaar*. Apr. 1996: 116-117.

References

- Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. *Anti-Indianism in Modern America*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Stannard, David E. *The Conquest of the New World: American Holocaust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Tooker, Elisabeth. *Native North American Spirituality of the Eastern Woodlands*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, Inc., 1979.
- Waldman, Carl. *Atlas of the North American Indian, Revised Edition*. New York: Checkmark Books, 2000.
- Waldman, Carl. *Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes, Third Tradition*. New York: Checkmark Books, 2006.